DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 602 TM 800 733

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TITLE A Comparative Study of the Moral Judgments of Adolescents Attending an Alternative and a Traditional High School.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (64th, Boston, MA, April 7-11, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS High Schools; *High School Students; *Moral Values; *Nontraditional Education; Social Problems; *Social Values; *Traditional Schools
IDENTIFIERS Defining Issues Test; *Moral Judgment

ABSTRACT

The Defining Issues Test (DIT), which utilizes the moral development stage theory of L. Kohlberg, was administered to 41 students from an upper middle class school district in Pennsylvania. The scores of students who elected to attend the alternative high school were compared with the scores of students who elected to attend the district's traditional high school. The variables measured were moral stage usage, anti-authoritarianism, and decision of whether or not to break the law to resolve a moral dilemma. Statistical analysis (t tests) revealed that, although no significant differences existed in anti-authoritarianism or in usage of stages 2, 3, 5, or 6, a significant difference existed in usage of stage 4 which is thought to be an endorsement of the status quo of "law and order." This finding relates to another significant difference in which the alternative school students were more likely to endorse breaking the law as a solution to a moral dilemma. (Author)

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MORAL JUDGMENTS OF ADOLESCENTS ATTENDING AN ALTERNATIVE AND A TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The Defining Issues Test (DIT), which utilizes the moral development stage theory of L. Kohlberg, was administered to 41 students from an upper middle class school district in Pennsylvania. The scores of students who elected to attend the alternative high school were compared with the scores of students who elected to attend the district's traditional high school. The variables measured were moral stage usage, anti-authoritarianism, and decision of whether or not to break the law to resolve a moral dilemma. Statistical analysis (t tests) revealed that, although no significant differences existed in anti-authoritarianism or in usage of Stages 2, 3, 5, or 6, a significant difference existed in usage of Stage 4 which is thought to be an endorsement of the status quo of "law and order." This finding relates to another significant difference in which the alternative school students were more likely to endorse breaking the law as a solution to a moral dilemma.

When Fantini (1975) reviewed various conceptions of alternative schooling, he placed Kozol and Kohl as representatives of the view that alternative schools afford an "opportunity to incorporate into the educational process political and cultural orientations that differ from established societal norms." If this premise is a viable one, then it might be expected that students who elect to attend such schools may differ in some ways from students within the same school district who do not elect to attend the alternative school. To be more specific, perhaps their orientations toward societal norms differ.

Although Wasserman (1976) reports of an attempt to implement Kohlberg's "Just Community Concept" in an alternative high school in which the staff believes that many students have been showing progress on Kohlberg's Moral Reasoning Interview, few studies present a differential analysis of the moral reasoning of students who elect to attend the two types of schools.

The Kohlberg developmental theory of morality has facets which are related to Fantini's conception of "orientations that differ from societal norms" in that Kohlberg's stages of morality are related to endorsement (or non-endorsement) of societal norms, especially Stages 3 through 6 which involve a progression from conventional to post-conventional modes of thinking. For an exposition and analysis of Kohlberg's stage theory, see Lickona (1976).

Although not specifically measuring moral development, several investigators have sought to assess some broad differences between these types of schooling. Among these investigators are Haworth (1976) who asked the question, "Are alternative high schools really so different?"; Duke and Muzio (1978) who asked, "How effective are alternative schools?"; and Shaw, Tomcala, Middleton, Rudee, Jones and Smith (1975) who did a comparative study of students in alternative and traditional high schools.

Duke and Muzio (1978) concluded that in addition to eight other factors which cause weaknesses in evaluation of alternative schooling, the general

absence of control group data from students attending traditional schools within the same school district presents them from saying with any degree of certainty how alternative school students compare with traditional school students. Some variables which might have a mitigating effect on differences appear to be SES and openness to innovations. Sommerville (1969) found no significant differences among the two types of schools, if both were within the same high socio-economic status district and Haworth (1976) found few differences in school districts which operated both an alternative and a traditional high school; therefore, if differences are to be assessed, then students attending the two types of schools within the same school district should be selected to control for effect of SES and innovative openness.

The purpose of this study was two-fold: first, to ascertain if any significant differences exist in moral judgment level among students who elect to attend an alternative school versus students who elect to attend the regular district high school; second, to ascertain if any significant differences exist between the two groups in propensity to endorse breaking the law (which can be seen as a societal norm) as a solution to a moral dilemma.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 41 students (29 males, 12 females) attending either the regular district high school (24) or an alternative high school (17) in an upper middle class school district in southeastern Pennsylvania. These students were identified by their social studies teachers as being of above-average intellectual ability. Ages ranged from 16 to 19 years.

Procedure

The Defining Issues Test (DIT) of James Rest (19..) was administered to the students during the Winter of 1978. Three dilemmas from the six which involved a decision of whether or not a law should be broken were used. They involved questions of whether or not to steal a drug to save a dying woman, whether or not to "take over" a campus institution, whether or not to report a reformed escaped prisoner. This is a paper and pencil inventory of stages of moral development which correlates acceptably with the Kohlberg interview scores. It also includes measures of anti-authoritarianism and endorsement of meaningless statements.

Results

To contrast usage of moral stage between students at the two schools, t tests were performed for each stage and for endorsement of anti-authoritarian (A scale) or meaningless statements (M scale). A t test was also performed on the Principled Reasoning (P) score which is a composite score derived from scores on Stages 5a, 5b, and 6.

TABLE 1

t Scores for DIT Responses

		Trad.	Alt.	t	p
Stage 2	x	1.83	3.05	1.64	N.S.
	sd	2.27	2.46		
	N	24	17	39	
Stage 3	x	5.62	7.05	1.16	N.S.
	sd	3.95	3.76		
	N	24	17	39	
Stage 4	x	8.04	6.11	1.76	.05
	sd	3.87	3.60		
	N	24	17	39	

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

		Trad.	Alt.	t	p
Stage 5a	x	8.25	6.47	1.55	N.S.
	sd	3.50	3.77		
	N	24	17	39	
Stage 5b	x	.91	1.0	.18	N.S.
	sd	1.28	1.62		
	N	24	17	39	
Stage 6	x	2.12	1.47	.98	N.S.
	sd	2.38	1.62		
	N	24	17	39	
A Score	x	1.41	2.17	1.42	N.S.
	sd	1.53	1.81		
	N	24	17	39	
M Score	x	1.62	2.11	.71	N.S.
	sd	1.88	1.53		
	N	24	17	39	
P Score	x	11.29	8.94	1.63	N.S.
	sd	4.69	4.45		
	N				

As can be seen from Table 1, although there were no significant differences in usage of Stages 2, 3, 5, 6 between students attending traditional versus alternative schools within the same school district, there was a significant difference in student's use of Stage 4, with students from the traditional school scoring higher than students from the alternative high school in Stage 4 usage. Although Stage 2, 3, 5,

and 6 differences are not significantly different, there is a pattern of higher scores on Stages 2 and 3 for alternative school students and higher scores on Stages 4 and 5 and P for traditional school students.

Analysis was performed on the actual choice of response to the dilemma by the students attending both schools. A student could answer in the affirmative, negative, or undecided categories. To see if students endorsed any particular response to a differential degree (response bias), a chi square analysis was done for response choice of both groups.

TABLE 2

DIT Responses of Students from the Alternative High School

Dilemma	Decision		
	Yes	No	Undecided
1	11	5	1
2	8	8	1
3	1	11	5

$x^2 = 10.24$

$df = 4$

$P(x^2) = .96$

TABLE 3

DIT Responses of Students from the Traditional High School

Dilemma	Decision		
	Yes	No	Undecided
1	6	9	9
2	8	13	3
	3	16	5

$x^2 = 14.97$

$df = 4$

$P(x^2) = .99$

As can be seen from Tables 2 and 3, chi square analysis reveals that for both groups of students, responses were influenced by the particular dilemma and not by any response bias. For the alternative school, $x^2 = 10.24$, df = 4, P = .04; for the traditional school, $x^2 = 14.97$, df = 4, P = .01.

TABLE 4

Responses of Students from the Alternative High School to the Three DIT Dilemmas Involving Breaking a Law

Dilemma	Decision		
	Yes	No	Undecided
1	11	5	1
2	8	8	1
3	11	1	5

$x^2 = 4.45$

df = 4

$P(x^2) = .66$

TABLE 5

Responses of Students from the Traditional High School to the Three DIT Dilemmas Involving Breaking a Law

Dilemma	Decision		
	Yes	No	Undecided
1	6	9	9
2	8	13	3
3	16	3	5

$x^2 = 10.55$

df = 4

$P(x^2) = .97$

However, Tables 4 and 5 reveal that when data are re-analyzed as to whether or not a law should be broken, the groups differ with the alternative school students showing a greater tendency to select breaking the law regardless of the particular dilemma. For the alternative school, $x^2 = 4.45$, df = 4, P = .34, while the probability of the traditional school student's choices still lie within the .05 level of significance: $x^2 = 10.55$, df = 4, P = .03.

Discussion

The findings indicate that in most aspects of moral reasoning (as measured by the DIT), students who elect to attend the different schools within the same district do not differ; however, the two areas in which they do differ bear a strong conceptual relationship to one another. That is, students attending the traditional high school endorse Stage 4 reasoning to a greater degree than the alternative school students; thus, one could predict that they might be reluctant to endorse breaking the law as a way to resolve a moral dilemma, whereas the group that scored lower on Stage 4 usage might be more likely to endorse breaking the law. This was the case in the present findings. Stage 4 can be conceived of as an endorsement of the existing laws or societal norms, and students who attend the alternative institution, as compared with other students, do not score as high on this Stage and are more likely to endorse breaking an established societal norm to resolve a moral conflict. These findings could provide some support for the contention of Kozol and Kohl that alternative schools afford an "opportunity to incorporate into the educational process political and cultural orientations that differ from established societal norms."

Caution is advised in interpreting these results, as many alternative schools differ in focus and population. Also, the sample is small and over-represented with males and, since this research was conducted after students

had been in attendance at the school for at least five months, it cannot be said to what extent these findings existed prior to their attendance at the school; however, this study is a start in trying to illuminate differences in moral judgment among students electing to attend diverse educational settings.

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